

Constructing Peaceful Masculinities in the Face of Conflict among High School Boys

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ABSTRACT Masculinity is a contradictory gendered phenomenon and it is possible – and indeed quite common – for contradictory positions to exist side by side and to be occupied simultaneously by boys. Individuals occupy multiple positions and therefore have a range of identities, with different ones acquiring significance in different contexts. This study examines how masculinities were implicated in handling conflict among boys at a co-educational secondary school in Durban, South Africa. In dealing with conflict there were hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions that boys could inhabit, and some boys inhabited one more than the other because they embraced particular masculine positions. Drawing on qualitative research, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and informal discussions this study sought to identify how some boys managed to acquire non-violent, peaceful versions of masculinity in the face of conflict. The researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of the boys in the study. All three semi-structured interviews with the boys were conducted in the first year of the study and spread over the school year. The unstructured interviews and the informal discussions with respondents spanned over the three-year period of the study. The researcher focused on those boys that had an allegiance to particular constructions of masculinity which were at variance with the school's hegemonic masculinity. The findings indicate that in those cases where the conflict was defused peacefully, different, alternative, non-confrontational understandings of masculinity were salient. The values which the boys asserted included respect, being able to exercise restraint, and being independent, strong-willed and individualistic in their thinking and actions. When these boys chose peace over violence they were behaving autonomously, drawing on different discourses of conflict resolution embedded in alternative understandings of what it was to be a man, which involved being independent, strong-willed and individualistic in their thinking and actions.